

Railroad Scheming and Trickery

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Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria east to the Indiana border. Just 15 years later, in 1872, the Chicago & Paducah Railroad came to town, giving Fairbury its second railroad track. Both of these major events involved quite a bit of scheming and trickery.

When the first railroad, the Peoria & Oquawka (later renamed the TP&W Railroad), started moving east from Peoria, several Fairbury area farmers wanted the tracks to run through their farms. Relatively cheap farmland could be converted to residential building lots for a new town along the railroad, and a lot of money could be made.

The man in charge of building this railroad was 25-year-old Civil Engineer Octave Chanute (1832-1910). Late in his life, Mr. Chanute changed his focus from Civil Engineering to Aeronautical Engineering, and he assisted the Wright Brothers in their efforts to build the first airplane. Chanute Air Force Base at Rantoul, Illinois, was named in honor of Octave Chanute.

Caleb Patton was one of the farmland owners competing to run the new railroad through his land. To win this competition, Mr. Patton proposed offering half of the new building lots in the new town to the railroad if Mr. Chanute chose his farm. Octave Chanute wisely accepted Caleb Patton's proposal. Some of the lots in downtown Fairbury are still owned by the TP&W Railroad today.

Alma Lewis James (1899-1979) was a Fairbury historian and author. Her most famous book about Fairbury history was titled *Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars*. She released her first edition in 1967 and her second edition in 1977. In her book, Alma recounted that when Octave Chanute agreed to run the new railroad tracks through Caleb Patton's farm, Mr. Patton laid his farm out into building lots. A few houses and businesses had buildings built before the railroad tracks even arrived at Fairbury.

As the new railroad tracks approached present-day Fairbury, many citizens threatened to get a court injunction if Chanute did not run his tracks around the new settlement on Patton's farm.

Octave Chanute faced a dilemma. If he could run the railroad through Mr. Patton's farm, he and the railroad would own half of the building lots. If he diverted the railroad around the new settlement, he would lose ownership of half of the new town, and changing the route of the tracks would cost more money.

The state of Illinois had recently passed a new law that said if new railroad tracks were laid and a locomotive ran over them, the tracks could not be legally removed. Mr.

Chanute also knew the Livingston County courthouse in Pontiac was not open on weekends, and no injunctions stopping his railroad could be issued on weekends.

Octave Chanute developed a unique plan to build his new tracks through Patton's farm. He had the railroad building crews build the tracks on both sides of the new little settlement on Patton's farm. On a weekend, he had the crew work through the night, install the tracks on Patton's farm, and quickly run a locomotive over the tracks. By Monday morning, the tracks were successfully laid through Patton's farm, and the village of Fairbury was created.

The ***Founding of Fairbury, Illinois***, by Dale C. Maley, has complete details of the competitive battle between farmers to get the railroad run through their farmland. This book can be borrowed from the Dominy Memorial Library, or printed copies can be purchased at Fairbury Furniture in the Walton Building.

John and his son Henry Marsh were early Fairbury citizens. In 1862, they dug and found coal 180 feet deep about one mile west of Fairbury. They set up the Marsh Addition to Fairbury on the village's west side so more houses could be built in Fairbury. They also donated one square block of land in the Marsh Addition to be made into a public park, now named Marsh Park.

John Marsh lived in a house just southwest of Marsh Park that still stands. John and Henry Marsh's goal was to develop the business section of Fairbury on the west end of town. Another group wanted the business section to develop on Fairbury's east side. According to Alma Lewis James, Fairbury historian, this set off a several-decade-long feud between the West and East Enders.

In 1872, it was announced that a second railroad was coming to Fairbury called the Chicago & Paducah Railroad (later renamed the Wabash Railroad). The West and East Enders began to scheme how the new railroad could benefit their two factions.

John Marsh secretly lobbied the railroad officials. He succeeded and got the railroad to agree to bring the tracks into his west end of town and then head directly south to Strawn, bypassing the city's East end.

The East Enders were very dismayed when they learned the new railroad would bypass their East End of town, but they did not give up their cause.

On Saturday, the railroad construction had completed laying track from McDowell to the west side of Fairbury on John Marsh's land. The railroad's President came to Fairbury, and John and his son Henry Marsh conducted a big celebration party at McDowell Hall on the West Side.

The railroad President and the Marsh faction members had bad hangovers on Sunday morning after the big celebration party. They did not notice that with the assistance of armed guards, the East Enders laid the new railroad tracks across Fairbury such that the

new railroad turned south towards Strawn on the east side of Fairbury. They could not get hold of a locomotive to run over the new tracks until the next day, but the new rails stayed in place. The result was that the new railroad equally served Fairbury's West and East ends.

Just a few years later, the branch of the Chicago & Paducah from Fairbury to Strawn was removed because other north-south railroads served this route. The branch from Streator to Fairbury was later renamed the Wabash Railroad. This railroad ran until sometime in the late 1970s, when the track was removed from Pontiac to Fairbury. The outline of this track can be seen where intersecting roads go in an east-west direction.

Before the advent of the automobile in the early 1900s, railroads were the most important means of transportation. New towns, like Fairbury, sprang up where new railroads were installed. The railroads provided a way for farmers to get their products to markets, and they brought in vital supplies and merchandise. Fairbury was created when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to Indiana. Just 15 years after the town was founded in 1857, Fairbury got a second railroad named the Chicago & Paducah. These two railroads helped Fairbury grow and become a thriving small town in Central Illinois.



